

## **Tahrir or Tottenham: Two Tales of the Social Media and the Myth of Freedom**

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The Internet and especially the social media are being seen as a tool for liberation and enhancement of human rights. However, it could be argued that not only the social media do not live up to these expectations but also it is a domain with no intrinsic quality of its own. Instead, the representation of the influence that the new technologies have is still fundamentally entangled in power relations that are by no means virtual. An illustrative comparison could be that between the Egyptian revolution and the 2011 UK riots – two cases of mass mobilisation where the social media have been perceived as crucial facilitators – and yet perceived radically differently.

The ‘Arab Spring’ and the revolution in Egypt in particular shook the Western view of the Arab World as well as strategic interests profoundly. The Arab world was primarily seen as a region of autocrats, who were brutal to a greater or a lesser extent but nevertheless guaranteed stability in these predominantly Muslim countries and restrained the possible coming to power of Islamist movements. Egypt especially was a key Western ally in the region, and the Mubarak regime enjoyed significant support, especially from the US.<sup>1</sup> Concurrently, the societies of the Arab states were seen as weak, fragmented and prone to manipulation thus both posing no serious danger to the established regimes and not worthy to be trusted. Therefore, when the ‘Arab Spring’ broke out, the West struggled to normalise and order the underlying reality, which had reminded about itself. Therefore, comparisons with such established examples as the European revolutions of 1989 (a march towards democracy)<sup>2</sup> or 1848 (revolutions stolen by reactionaries)<sup>3</sup> are symptomatic of making the ‘Arab Spring’ recognisable. This was done by emphasising the Egyptians’ desire to become ‘like us’: both in their desire for democracy and in their usage of ‘our’ means, i.e. the much-hyped social media. As a result, the exceptionality of Egypt was included into the normality of world order by portraying it as a new, ‘post-modern’, revolution.

The story was absolutely different with the UK riots. Here also a basic well-ordered scheme of events soon emerged: young hooded teenagers and men (although not always necessarily men) carrying bats and/or Molotov cocktails convened seemingly instantly, thrashed and looted a

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Springborg, “Whither the Arab Spring? 1989 or 1848?,” *The International Spectator*, 46(3) 2011: 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> Lucan Way, “Comparing the Arab Revolts: The Lessons of 1989,” *Journal of Democracy*, 22(4) (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Springborg, *supra note 1*.

neighbourhood, and dispersed as quickly as they had gathered.<sup>4</sup> This instantaneous gathering was once again enabled by the social media.

Needless to say, social media undoubtedly facilitates communication, and this is a significant development in authoritarian regimes that attempt to limit the public space and often use it for manipulation thus creating distrust in any information provided. Social media, meanwhile, provides user-generated content and allows it to disseminate it avoiding any official networks,<sup>5</sup> connects people with similar grievances and facilitates the creation of communal feeling.<sup>6</sup> And yet, what is usually forgotten is that even in this case two elements are needed: first, a core of hard-line devotees who prepare the information and carry out the initial dissemination to accumulate a critical mass of followers and make it viral; second, a set of grievances and other motivations that would turn the general public into users (and possibly disseminators) of such information (and even more serious grievances to cause action ‘on the ground’, which requires more effort and possibly sacrifice) – in other words, potentiality has to turn into actuality. Social media has not changed either of these. What is even more, the challenge to turn online activism and engagement into activities ‘offline’ is even more difficult because the internet tends to create weak ties of users rather than of members.<sup>7</sup> Finally, despite the fact that internet users participating in the revolution were more informed and more active than non-users,<sup>8</sup> the causal link is still unclear: it is highly possible that these people were *already* active before embracing the internet and the choice of means was merely incidental or a strategic addition to an already pre-existing arsenal.

The representation of social media in the case of the UK riots was once again very different. Here it was not a space of liberation or, if it was, then of very specific liberation indeed. This media, and especially the Blackberry Messenger (BBM), was indeed widely used by the youths to organise themselves and transmit information.<sup>9</sup> But here it also achieved a certain quasi-mystical quality of an impenetrable place where vice and anarchy strive – once again, especially concerning the BBM due to the impossibility to retrieve and decipher its messages, in contrast to the more open and conventional spaces of Facebook and Twitter. In either case, the ideas to switch off not necessarily the entire internet but at least some of its services sounded eerily similar to those voiced earlier in

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Kellner, “The Dark Side of the Spectacle: Terror in Norway and the UK Riots,” *Cultural Politics*, 8(1) (2012): 10.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Etling, Robert Faris, and John Palfrey, “Political Change in the Digital Age: The Fragility and Promise of Online Organizing,” *SAIS Review*, 30(2) (2010): 39.

<sup>6</sup> Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, “The Role of Digital Media,” *Journal of Democracy* 22(3) (2011): 40-41.

<sup>7</sup> Jeroen Van Laer and Peter Van Aelst, “Internet and Social Movement Action Repertoires: Opportunities and Limitations,” *Information, Communication & Society*, 13(8) (2010): 1163.

<sup>8</sup> Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson, “Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations from Tahrir Square,” *Journal of Communication*, 62 (2012): 375.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Kellner, *supra* note 4, p. 10.

Egypt. And, once again, the question remains as to why one should follow the threads in social media and act accordingly, i.e. that of motivation. What is more, participation in rioting and looting appeared to be based more on individual decision than on significant social interaction.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Egypt (but also the Middle East in general), chronic corruption, often directly related with foreign aid, multiple failures of important social and infrastructure projects, socioeconomic disparities were key factors in causing massive discontent.<sup>11</sup> Although there is a tendency to see the revolution as a generational conflict between the young, dynamic, internet-literate, and pro-democratic generation and the ageing autocrat,<sup>12</sup> this was not entirely the case as many of the grievances were shared across the society and generations. As a result, it was a response to the deficiencies of the system as such and not some primordial striving for democracy and larger freedom that united the protesters, as illustrated by subsequent developments. What is even more, the image we have of the revolution was formed by the internet users themselves in a way that most reflects their attitudes and experiences; a significant portion of the protesters remained unrepresented because it had no means to make its voice heard.<sup>13</sup>

Notably, demonstrations should not be seen as an exceptional event in Egyptian politics. Minor outbreaks were common and therefore the revolution should be seen as having been in the making for years.<sup>14</sup> Thus one could speak about the importance of a vision or a mental model that had developed over time<sup>15</sup> but not necessarily about spontaneous online organisation. No less important was the maintenance of the protests ‘on the ground’, especially in the case of the camp on Tahrir Square, where a high amount of cooperation and ‘real’ action was required.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the protests, once small-scale and more or less *ad hoc*, continued and grew despite occasional threats and even sporadic violence. What is important here is the initial precedent of success and a symbolic centre (again an ‘offline’ one) around which further action could develop. When a ‘real’ material centre begins to develop, favourable conditions develop for real interpersonal relations that stipulate commitment even if danger is present. Furthermore, the regime’s response was important. Indeed, the Arab autocrats appeared to be vulnerable during the so-called ‘Spring’.<sup>17</sup> This, however,

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<sup>10</sup> Bill Durodié, “The Changing Nature of Riots in the Contemporary Metropolis from Ideology to Identity: Lessons from the Recent UK Riots,” *Journal of Risk Research*, 15(4) (2012): 349.

<sup>11</sup> Carolyn M. Youssef, “Recent Events in Egypt and the Middle East: Background, Direct Observations and a Positive Analysis,” *Organizational Dynamics* 40 (2011): 223-224

<sup>12</sup> Ashraf M. Attia et al., “Commentary: The impact of social networking tools on political change in Egypt’s ‘Revolution 2.0’,” *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications* 10 (2011): 370.

<sup>13</sup> Christian Christensen, “Discourses of Technology and Liberation: State Aid to Net Activists in an Era of ‘Twitter Revolutions’,” *The Communication Review*, 14 (2011): 248.

<sup>14</sup> Carolyn M. Youssef, *supra note* 11, p. 225.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227-228.

<sup>17</sup> Vincent Cannistraro, “Arab Spring: A Partial Awakening,” *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 22(4) (2011): 47.

is determined not only by the autocrat's *willingness* but also by his *ability* to retain support of crucial forces within his regime.<sup>18</sup> For example, the major breakthrough of the Egyptian revolution was not the accumulation of large crowds in Tahrir Square but the decision of the military to force the resignation of Mubarak who was strongly clinging on power only a day earlier,<sup>19</sup> making it more a military coup than a revolution. The dominance of military (and many Mubarak-era officials) in post-revolutionary Egypt only confirmed this.

The attempts to explain the UK riots are much more diverse as they tend to be motivated first and foremost by the ideological orientation and political aims of the commentators, but most of them still are entirely speculative.<sup>20</sup> The only thing everybody seems to agree on is that there are serious social and economic problems underlying the British society, but the interpretations of causes and presentations of possible cures vary significantly. Those on the left of the political spectrum usually tend either to equate the riots with the crisis of global capitalism (and see them as “an explosion of rage and market-driven greed”<sup>21</sup> rather than motivated by political goals) or to emphasise rising deprivation, inequality, and spending cuts by the Conservative-led coalition government<sup>22</sup> thus returning to the domain of politics. Meanwhile, those on the right prefer to stress ‘sick communities’, ‘moral decay’, ‘poor parenting’, and, in the words of David Cameron, a ‘broken society’.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, a third possible perspective is to concentrate on the general moral failures within a society, not only among the rioters. This includes the perception of corporate and banker greed as the causes of the financial crisis as well as a recent parliamentary expenses scandal making it more socially acceptable to simply take what you want and stipulating distrust in state institutions.<sup>24</sup> Both long-term research and surveys conducted immediately in the aftermath of the riots appear to support the latter hypothesis.<sup>25</sup> Alienation, lack of real prospects, and crisis of legitimacy were indeed important issues that led to the riots.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, economic reasons do not offer a full explanation since rioting was not confined to the poor and unprivileged and clearly food stores were not prime targets of looters as they opted for less basic but more expensive goods.<sup>27</sup> Also, response was important, similarly as in the Egyptian case: it was the slow, ineffective, and often impotent police response as well as a lack of attempt to impose any authority by the

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Mohamed El-Khawas, “Egypt’s Unfinished Revolution,” *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 23(1) (2012): 57-58.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Phillips, Diane Frost and Alex Singleton, “Researching the Riots,” *The Geographical Journal*, (2012): 2.

<sup>21</sup> Douglas Kellner, *supra note 4*, p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Birch and Nicholas Allen, “‘There will be Burning and a-Looting Tonight’: The Social and Political Correlates of Law-Breaking,” *The Political Quarterly*, 83(1) (2012): 33.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas Kellner, *supra note 4*, p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Sarah Birch and Nicholas Allen, *supra note 23*, p. 34.

government itself that contributed to the “casual pursuit of looting in an almost relaxed atmosphere”<sup>28</sup> and further encouraged the youths.

Developments offline are crucial not only for the revolution itself but also for the post-revolutionary period. One of them is the international context: whereas the European revolutions of 1989 were facilitated by the global shift of power, an absence of such shift might hamper the consolidation of the ‘Arab Spring’.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, internally, the success of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organisations after the revolution illustrates that the existence of ‘real’ offline ties and networks is crucial in the long run. As it was perfectly summarised by Cannistraro, “The young people who filled Cairo’s Tahrir Square may know how to use Facebook, but the Brotherhood has a branch in every neighborhood and town”.<sup>30</sup> Keeping this in mind, the recent electoral success of Islamist parties seems absolutely logical.

As far as the UK rioters are concerned, it is precisely the non-existence of any bonds whatsoever that was crucial to not only the sporadic and dispersed nature of the events but also to their sudden and unexpected beginning and end. Indeed, if earlier riots (e.g. in the early 1980s) were characterised by collective aims and collective action which was undoubtedly political in character, “what united the youths involved in 2011 was not a shared ideology, but rather their taste in footwear (Nike trainers) and electrical goods (plasma TV screens)”.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that after the riots calmed down, everything came back to ‘normal’ and no new reality was created.

Lacanian psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on desire, could offer a useful explanation. It is worth noting that, for Lacan, in an object of desire “there is from the beginning something other than use value. There is its *jouissance* use”<sup>32</sup>, i.e. the satisfaction that a person attributes to the object. Needless to say, the actual satisfaction is always less than expected, leaving the subject to constantly transfer his/her desire to yet another thing.<sup>33</sup> Political reality (as any other reality), on its own part, is a phantasmatic coherence produced through a specific ordering of meaning and value attached to objects and phenomena – the symbolic structure of ideas that governs desire and facilitates its transference when needed.<sup>34</sup> As stressed by Lacan, ‘I see *outside*’,<sup>35</sup> namely, perception lies in the order external to the subject that nevertheless is the essence of the subject’s constitution. Consequently, law and power are not only external – they are also internal, deeply

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<sup>28</sup> Bill Durodié, *supra* note 10, p. 351.

<sup>29</sup> Vincent Cannistraro, *supra* note 18, p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> Bill Durodié, *supra* note 10, p. 350.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge), 1992, p. 229.

<sup>33</sup> Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London and New York: Routledge), 2005, p. 87-88.

<sup>34</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge), 1999, p. 75-76.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (London and New York: Penguin Books), 1994, p. 80.

rooted in a subject's desire.<sup>36</sup> As a result, politics is about providing enjoyment for the people and satisfying their desire. However, since any satisfaction is not enough, it is also about creating new promises of enjoyment (as well as actual satisfaction) in order to channel desire. When, due to some reason, the chain of satisfaction gets stuck, discontent arises.

The riots in the UK and the revolution in Egypt could indeed be seen as the Lacanian Real that beaks the symbolic ordering of the world that we live in – as the ‘heart of darkness’ in which horror strives. In both cases discussed, it was the lack of enjoyment that broke through the law, although the issues at stake were undoubtedly very different: from basic economic, social and political deprivation of protesters to the narcissism of boasting looters. Accordingly, the presence (in Egypt) or absence (in UK) of notable organisation and attempt to bring about change was visible. One more possible way would be to see the events through the lens of Benjamin's conceptualisation of violence. Indeed, as seen in Egypt, “all law-preserving violence, in its duration, indirectly weakens the lawmaking violence represented by it, through the suppression of hostile counterviolence”<sup>37</sup> until there is a new power strong enough to triumph. Meanwhile, the UK events could be seen as ‘divine violence’ which neither makes nor preserves law, accepting sacrifice not for some complete emancipation but only in the name of abstract justice as such (in Benjamin's own words, “the sign and seal but never the means of sacred execution”<sup>38</sup>) – that is, an expiating one.<sup>39</sup> But at the same time this is also the Schmittian exception, where reality breaks through the crust of repetition.<sup>40</sup> It is well known that for Schmitt the sovereign decides on the exception, and it is the exception that constitutes the very relevance of sovereignty.<sup>41</sup> The crucial question is, then, who had decided on the exception in a particular case: the protesters, any other societal group, or the state apparatus. On the one hand, when illegality becomes extreme, it can convert itself into a new standard of legality<sup>42</sup> (as seen in Egypt), while on the other, failing to establish itself, it may only remain as the outside (in UK).

It is worth noting that if for Schmitt the taking of land (*Landesnahme*) is the spatial precondition of order, then the taking of the outside (*Ausnahme* – his term for the exception) is a

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<sup>36</sup> A. Kiarina Kordela, *Surplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 2007, p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence”: 277, in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books), 1986, p. 300.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>39</sup> Marc de Wilde, “Violence in the State of Exception Reflections on Theologico-Political Motifs in Benjamin and Schmitt”: 188, in: Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press), 2006, p. 198.

<sup>40</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theory* (Cambridge (MA) and London: The MIT Press), 1985, p. 15.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

<sup>42</sup> Hent Kalmo, “A Matter of Fact? The Many Faces of Sovereignty”: 114, in Hent Kalmo and Quentin Skinner, *Sovereignty in Fragments: The Past, Present and Future of a Contested Concept* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press), 2010, p. 114.

juridical precondition.<sup>43</sup> Unavoidably, at the end there is a decision that ‘normalises’ the situation, once again subsuming it under the (extended) symbolic. Violence thus becomes law-making in either case: either positively, by being able to decide and shape the new symbolic (as it was in Egypt, at least to a certain extent), or negatively, by being included as a new negation, decided upon outlawing provisions of the extended symbolic. As a result, there is hardly such thing as a purely anomic ‘divine’ violence. This also explains the different representations of Egypt and UK as different ways of inclusion, stemming from the different results of the explosion of the Real: the success of the former meant its normalisation and re-inclusion in the Western symbolic as a postmodern democratic revolution while the scarcity of any efficacy of the latter meant its inclusion only by exclusion. Central here is the (old-fashioned) sovereign decision. Finally, the examples of Egypt and the UK show that the social media is still a *terra incognita* in the field of political signification: a space of whatever, to which most varied qualities could be ascribed depending upon convenience, from the utopia of a free society to the dystopia of a channel for darkest desires.

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<sup>43</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1998, p. 19.